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ABSTRACT

A study identified the characteristics of women in an adult literacy program who had been successful in their return to studies. It was designed to learn more about the needs of women learners and what literacy programs can do to help women be successful in their return to studies. The literature review focused on these topics: women's knowledge, self-empowerment, consciousness raising, social reproduction, and difficulties women have in their return to schools. Participants were three women enrolled in a community-based adult literacy program in Akron, Ohio. Research activities included the following: observation while each woman participated in different types of settings and interactions; observation of activities around the program; interviews of each learner twice for an hour each time; and interviews of program staff. These themes were evident in all three women's testimonies: (1) women who successfully return to schools had very strong support systems; (2) they found the program staff helpful, caring, and nurturing; (3) all had become advocates for literacy in their communities; (4) all experienced a period when they were ashamed to tell anyone close to them about their reading problems; (5) all experienced an awakening in which they felt that they had to do something about their problem; (6) all moved through several distinct stages of growth; (7) all had entered first grade with problems; and (8) all felt a sense of lost time from being in the world and not being able to read. (Contains 11 references.) (YLB)

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Determining the Characteristics of Successful Women in an Adult Literacy Program

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Sarah Nixon-Ponder
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Determining the Characteristics of

Successful Women in an Adult Literacy Program

Problem Statement:

This purpose of this study was to determine the characteristics of women in an adult literacy program who have been successful in their return to studies. The study was designed to learn more about the needs of women learners and what literacy programs can do to help women be successful in their return to studies.

Significance of Problem:

The majority of participants in adult literacy programs are women (Development Associates, 1993). Research shows that the literacy levels of children are strongly linked to their mother's level of literacy (Neuman & Gallagher, 1994), and as a result, family literacy programs are proliferating. Yet the needs of women in adult literacy programs are still unmet (Carmack, 1992).

Research Questions:

This qualitative research study attempted to answer the following questions:

1) What characteristics, strengths, and support must women have in order to return successfully to school?
2) How did the literacy program help the participants to realize their potential for success?
3) What did the program's staff believe they were doing to help women become successful in their return to school?

Assumptions of Study:

The following assumptions were made in this study:

1. All of the participants in this study were honest and sincere in their responses during interviews.
2. All of the participants in this study understood that this was a project for a course that I was taking at Kent State University and that names and other personal identifying information would be kept confidential.

Literature Review:

The following resources were used in building a theoretical framework for this study. At first I thought that I would build on the theory of social reproduction. But as I got further and further into the analysis of my data, I realized that I needed to look at something much more woman-specific. This realization led me to *Women's Ways of Knowing*, and ultimately placing this work as the theoretical basis of this paper. I then added another woman-specific study, *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives*, as the next layer in the foundation. Freire's concept of consciousness-raising is also a very integral part of the foundation of this study, which is evident in the changes in the lives of the three women who participated in this study. I decided to add social reproduction as a minor layer to the framework of this study, and completed the groundwork with a longitudinal study on women in literacy programs in Canada. These resources are discussed in the order of importance they hold in the foundation of this study, beginning with the most influential.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discuss five epistemological perspectives and categories of women's knowledge: "*1) silence*, a position in which women experience themselves as mindless and voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority; *2) received knowledge*, a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own; *3) subjective knowledge*, a perspective from which truth and knowledge are conceived of as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited; *4)*

procedural knowledge, a position in which women are invested in learning and applying objective procedures for obtaining and communication knowledge; and *5) constructed knowledge*, a position in which women view all knowledge as contextual, experience themselves as creators of knowledge, and value both subjective and objective strategies for knowing" (p. 15). These are not fixed or conclusive categories, nor are they only found in women.

While I was analyzing the data of my study, I found myself constantly going back to these categories, looking for clues as to where each of the participants would fit into these categories in terms of their development, self, and voice. Because all of the participants discussed aspects of their lives, I was able to chart their progress through these different stages and categories of knowing. All of the women moved through the first three categories while I believe that only one made it to the fifth category. Nevertheless, I do not believe that any of the women stayed in the silent category after returning to school and growing as women and learners.

Another qualitative ethnographic study that not only influenced my study but became part of the framework is *Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives* by Chellis (1992). This book looks into the lives of eight women who triumphed over adversity and became role models for other women struggling to overcome the odds. Chellis describes the process of self-empowerment and its five stages: 1) accepting; 2) networking; 3) choosing; 4) shifting; and 5) mentoring.

Each of these stages affects people differently, depending on their situation in life, what they are struggling with, and what it is they want to change. Chellis states that there is a natural progression from one stage to another, but it is possible for a person to be working on several stages at once. She draws on the experiences of the women she interviewed as well as her own personal battle with alcoholism to define these stages and the process of empowerment. In addition to the five stages, she discusses four new terms

that she ties in with these stages: self-value (in place of self esteem), chance to choose, positive shift, and empowering example.

The above five categories are explicit in the lives of the women I interviewed for this study. Each one moved through these categories as they grew in their self esteem and self value, and as their literacy skills improved, so did their view of the world.

Another layer that I believed would be appropriate to the foundational basis of this research project is Paulo Freire's theory of *conscientização* or consciousness raising (1970). Based on my work with adults with low literacy levels, conversations with former students, and observation of their actions over the course of several years, I have arrived at the conclusion that many adult literacy students (though not all) experience a certain amount of consciousness raising in regards to their life situation. Many use this awareness to further involve themselves with the literacy program, their community, their children's schooling, politics, etc. In *Literacy: Reading the word and the world* (1987), Freire discusses how his personal fear of the world was alleviated when he began to understand it and learned to *read* it, thus becoming consciously aware of his world and the words used to describe it and make it known to others.

For the women in this study, the awareness of their culture and history was an important aspect of their growth. One woman, an urban Appalachian, stated that she never realized that many people in her family were not able to read: uncles, aunts, grandparents, cousins. It was only when she herself learned how a low literacy level had affected her life and she reached out for assistance, did she realize that part of her culture and history was tied into her not being able to read well. The consciousness raising that occurred with her about her life situation caused her to not only strive to learn to read, but to fight to make sure that other women like her would come forward to get the help they needed.

Other women from the study began to look closely at their family history and culture and found that they, too, knew of other family members and close friends who

suffered from the same difficulty as they did. Part of their awareness and consciousness raising stemmed from the sense of relief they felt when they learned at a later point in their lives that they were not alone and did not need to be ashamed that they were not able to read very well.

I came to realize that the theory of social reproduction plays a small part in the foundation of this study. Not knowing much about this subject, I turned to my neighbor Dr. Jon Epstein, a sociologist who specializes in at-risk and deviant behaviors in teens and young adults. He discussed the theory of social reproduction with me, and loaned me the book *Ain't No Makin' It: Leveled Aspirations in a Low-income Neighborhood* (MacLeod, 1987), a qualitative study that does an excellent job of explaining this theory. Having worked in the adult basic education field for many years, I saw how the pieces of social reproduction fit within the scope of the lives of many of my former students; they basically had the same background and hopes as their parents did. They did not depart from the social or economic class of their parents. Their parents were not the doctors, attorneys, engineers, or bank presidents of the affluent class; they were the lower-middle class and upper-lower class people who worked for the affluent class in their businesses and offices--those who cleaned the hospitals and banks where the "other" Americans worked from 9 to 5.

The theory of social reproduction asks the question: "Why is there a strong tendency for working-class children to end up in working-class jobs?" (MacLeod, 1987, p. 9). In regards to this paper, it is also appropriate to restructure that question by asking: Why is there a strong tendency for parents with low-literacy levels to raise children with low-literacy levels? Bourdieu's central theme in the theory of social reproduction is the concept of cultural capital, defined as the "general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next" (MacLeod, 1987, p. 12). In the context of this study and by briefly looking into the lives of these three women, I was able to better understand the concept and theory of social reproduction.

Three resources from the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) in Toronto also shed light on this study, helping me to realize the difficulties women have in their return to school (Atkinson, Ennis, & Lloyd, 1994; Lloyd, Ennis, & Atkinson, 1994a & b). This longitudinal research project began in the late 1980s by asking questions about women in literacy programs: "Do the programs care about what happens to women? How do they show they care? What could be better?" (Atkinson, Ennis, & Lloyd, 1994, p. 3). Twelve programs around Canada decided to take part in this participatory program-based action research study, each of which is highlighted and described in the *Power of Woman-Positive Literacy Work* series.

Several of the findings from the CCLOW study correlated with findings from my study. They described four circumstances that make literacy harder for women to obtain: violence, poverty, isolation, and discrimination. Not all of the women in my study experienced all four of these circumstances; however, each one of these life-circumstances were present at one time or another in at least one of the three women. For example, one woman experienced violence from her husband for attending literacy classes at Project: Learn. Because of this abusive behavior, she quit meeting with her tutor for a period of time until they were able to come to a mutual understanding about her reasons for wanting to improve her literacy skills. All three of the women in my study suffered from the effects of poverty at different points during their lives. One woman grew up in a very impoverished family in West Virginia, and the other two women had both spent some time as AFDC recipients. One woman and her family were presently living in public housing although they were not currently receiving public assistance other than food stamps and reduced housing allowance. All of the women experienced the effects of isolation due to their low literacy levels, especially in school when they were singled out for their inability to read. Discrimination was something that all three of the women discussed during the interviews. Two women believed that they did not receive the type of help that they should have in school because they were

African-Americans; the other woman stated that she believed that maybe if she hadn't have been from such a poor family, the school would have tried harder to help her.

Another finding from the CCLOW study that correlated with my study was the notion that literacy involves more than just reading and writing and that students need to be involved in making decisions about their learning. Good programs do more than just attend to the basic literacy needs of their students. They pay attention to their students' needs by offering support groups, advocacy groups, family literacy sessions, free materials to borrow, some type of child care, and involving their students in administrative issues and program control matters. Project:Learn met almost all of the criterion the Canadian research listed.

Participants:

The women who participated in this study were enrolled in a community-based adult literacy program located in downtown Akron, Ohio. Program staff members were asked to identify successful women in their program, and in turn, participants were also asked to identify other women whom they believed were successful women and students. From this pool of successful women, three agreed to participate in this study. All of the women were between 30 and 40 years of age, and surprisingly, all three had high school diplomas. Two were African-Americans; one was European-American with her cultural roots from Appalachia. All were married and had children, although their children were not necessarily from their present marriages.

I observed the women while each participated in several different types of settings and interactions. I was able to observe as several worked with their tutors. Two of the women participated in a weekly small group reading circle. One woman and her three children met with the family literacy VISTA volunteer for an hour of family reading activities. Two of the three women participated in a monthly meeting on advocacy in the community, discussing and planning the upcoming appearances and

speeches they would be conducting. All of them attended the weekly support group for women.

I also spent time observing the activities around the program. I was interested in the general atmosphere and the interactions between the staff members, tutors, and students. I spent several days just hanging around the program, talking with people as the came for tutoring sessions, worked independently or with friends on the computers, and searched through the books in the small library.

When I felt comfortable with the program and felt that the women were comfortable with me, I began the interviewing process after several days of observation. The three women learners were interviewed twice for an hour each time. Open-ended questions were asked to stimulate discussion about their life experiences: past and present experiences with school and their reading difficulties; how their low literacy level affected them personally; what made them decide to get help with their literacy skills; their personal support system and goals; how the literacy program has helped and how it can continue to help; differences between life now and before help was sought; types of reading they do every day; advice to youth considering dropping out; and advice to schools in regards to helping students with reading difficulties.

Program staff were interviewed as well. The director of the program was formally interviewed once although we spoke informally several times over a two week period. I also informally interviewed the VISTA volunteer who coordinated the family literacy program, and I spoke with the volunteer librarian, several tutors, and the support staff members. I was interested in learning about the perceptions of the staff: What did they think they were doing to promote success in their program, especially for the women learners? How did they see and describe the program? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the program? I wanted to compare these responses with the answers from the corresponding questions that were asked to the women participating in the study.

Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your previous school experiences.
2. Why did you not finish school?
3. Why did you decide to come back to school?
4. Why do you want to finish school?
5. Tell me about the support you receive from your family, friends, Project: Learn.
6. How is Project: Learn helping you achieve your goals?
7. What could Project: Learn do to help you more?
8. What do you think schools need to do to keep students from dropping out?
9. What advice would you give to a student who was thinking about not finishing school?

Preliminary Findings:

The researcher found several themes evident in all three of the women's testimonies.

1) Women who successfully return to school have very strong support systems. All of the women talked at length about their strong support systems. All of them had participated in the student support group at one time or another, and they all had at least one family member who was extremely supportive of them going back to school to improve reading skills. The women talked about their strong faith in God and their churches and how they believed that this was vital to their success in life.

2) The women found the program staff helpful, caring, and nurturing. They felt they were urged to achieve their goals. All stated that there was a period upon entering the program when someone on the staff reached out and pushed them toward their goal, telling them that they could do this--that they could read and write, and that they were good people who needed help with their reading. In addition, the women felt ownership and pride in the program.

3) All had become advocates for literacy in their communities. All of the women felt a sense of community responsibility to reach out to others who cannot read well--especially women--and share their problem with them in hopes of getting them into a program for some help with literacy skills. Each of the women said that they talked to women in their neighborhoods, on buses, at churches, and in schools telling them "well if I can do it, surely you can."

4) All three of the women experienced a period when they were ashamed to tell anyone close to them about their reading problems. Yet all stated that once they finally told a person about their difficulty, they felt like a weight had been lifted and were then able to tell more people about their problem. One woman stated: "I tell everyone I see now that I go to Project: Learn to get help with my reading. You never know when you'll help someone else."

5) All of the women experienced an awakening in which they felt that they had to do something about their problem. "Something just hit me, I can't describe it very well." Two of the three women said that after this experience, they sought out a loved one whom they told they needed and wanted help with their literacy skills.

6) All moved through several distinct stages of growth: ashamed to tell anyone, to do anything about the problem; experiencing an awakening that "I can do this, I am a good person"; developing positive self esteem; experiencing great personal and academic growth; and advocating for literacy.

7) All of the women stated that they had entered first grade with problems, and that by the end of first grade it was evident that they were not learning to read like the rest of the

children. All stated that the class sizes were large pretty much all the way through elementary school. Two of the women stated that their teachers never tried to help them or to seek help for them and never sent notes home informing their parents of the difficulties their daughters were having with reading. None of the women felt that they were teased by the other students for not being able to read. One woman stated that this was "probably because there were other kids who couldn't read too."

8) All of the women felt a sense of lost time from being in the world and not being able to read; they all conveyed a sense of needing to catch up with what they feel they have lost out on. "I'm still young and I've got a lot I want to do." One woman summed it up by saying, "I was surviving but not living."

Recommendations and Future Directions:

Several benefits were hoped to be gained from this project. First, the subjects' knowledge that their stories would help others in literacy programs to identify with their strengths and characteristics that have made them successful in returning to school. Second, Project: Learn will be able to evaluate their concepts of what they believe they are doing to foster successfulness in their adult students and compare these to what the students believe Project: Learn is doing to foster student success. Third, Project: Learn will have learned the benefits of applying qualitative research to their program evaluation process.

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